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ABSTRACT

This document describes a sexuality education program for preadolescent boys. It recommends that the teacher begin by finding out if the audience is captive or merely encouraged to attend. It is further suggested that groups be limited to 10 to 12 boys in the age range of 8 to 13. Advertising the classes, using food enticements for those attending, and offering classes for parents to review materials before they are presented to the boys are recommended. The problems a teacher could encounter with a group of boys, such as the boys testing the teacher with "dirty" words or asking personal sexual questions, are discussed. Recommendations include setting firm discipline rules, telling the boys there will be time for questions, and advising them not to laugh at the other boys' questions. The importance of respect and communication in the sessions is discussed. It is also suggested that homosexuality be discussed. Handouts are not recommended because the boys may be embarrassed by them. Several exercises/activities for the boys are described. (ABL)

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A SEXUALITY EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR PREADOLESCENT BOYS: ARE SPERM DIFFERENT COLORS?

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A SEXUALITY EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR PREADOLESCENT BOYS: ARE SPERM DIFFERENT COLORS?

"Are sperm different colors?"

This question from a 10-year-old boy participating in a series of sexuality education programs at a local recreation center is humorous perhaps, but ingenious, too, when you consider that people come in a variety of colors. Why shouldn't the color of the sperm (or egg) reflect that?

When offered the opportunity, young people have many different questions about sexual issues, depending on the setting and the youngsters' age, background, and sex. Boys' questions are very different from girls' questions, often reflecting very dissimilar views of sexuality.

When developing sexuality education programs, educators should keep in mind the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) differences between boys and girls. Having conducted a fair amount of educational programs for both pre-puberty groups and teen groups including males and females, I have learned to revamp my teaching strategies accordly. Although many variables may affect a groups response, I feel there are some specific approaches to keep in mind when working with young males in the area of sexuality education.

DESIGNING BOY'S PROGRAMS

When planning a series of sexuality programs with young boys, there are several things to consider in advance. If possible, learn something about the audience. Is this group a "captive" audience (school or detention home) or must the participants be "encouraged" to attend (community center or church)? Pre-adoles-

cent groups usually work best with children in the 9- to 12-year-old age group, although 8- or 13- year-olds could be included. It's a good idea to keep groups small (10 to 12), unless you have help. The type of group and the setting are also important considerations. Are these boys tough or "street-wise?" A detention home usually offers a different clientele than the local church youth group, which warrants a different teaching approach.

Select a time that will encourage participation and a relaxed atmosphere. Be certain you aren't competing with a basketball game next door or cutting into time allotted for swimming. Be flexible in changing dates if a conflict arises. Since boys are less likely to commit themselves to a continuing series, incentives may be needed. Perhaps special points or privleges can be awarded. Food is always an ideal enticement and can often be donated for a program. It's important to advertise or "talk-up" any series that is offered to encourage attendence.

If possible and appropriate, arrange a parents' night to show them the curriculum, films, or exercises that you plan to use and to answer any questions they may have. Strongly encourage both parents to attend by stressing how they can use these sessions as a way to open up lines of communication with their sons and feel more comfortable discussing sexuality at home. Let parents know where and when you will be available should any questions or concerns arise at a later date.

DIRTY FILMS AND NAKED LADIES

Now you have a roomful of young boys anxious to learn what these "sex" programs are all about. Comments include, "Are we going to see dirty films"? and "do you have any pictures of naked ladies?" Young girls rarely ask such questions. Why the difference, and what else can you expect when working with young males?

Males, for the most part, are still molded by a different socialization process than females and boys as young as eight or nine show evidence of this phenomenon. An all male group is more likely to challenge an authority figure, particularly when the subject is sexuality. Boys feel they should know about this subject matter at any age. It is this premise (men just know about these things) that causes embarrassrent, which results in off-the-wall jokes and personal observations. Instead of questions, one hears such statements as, "I know how to have sex with a girl" (11-year-old) or "if you have sex with a prostitute you'll get VD", (12-year-old).

Many comments reflect a need to "test" the group leader. Slang or "dirty" words are utilized to see what shock effect they will have. This also serves to impress peers with their knowledge of the subject and may be a way to vie for the position of peer leader. Boys tend to be more competitive than girls. They may already have a "leader" -- one who attempts to monopolize the time, divert attention to himself or indulge in disruptive behaviors. Boys commonly attemp to sway by asking the adult personal sexual questions. These behaviors may be more pronounced if the group is cohesive, if they know each other and are friends (or enemies), and if they spend time

together outside the group setting.

These behaviors are a direct result of boys struggling to attain a certain masculinity--macho, if you will. Impressions obtained from magazines, music, cable television or an older brother may prove to be obstacles to many of the topics you need to discuss. Combating media influences and popular myths are difficult at best: How does one encourage knowledge, sensitivity, and responsibility without devaluing what are considered models of masculinity?

Setting firm ground rules and maintaining discipline is imperative. Specify when and under what conditions a person can leave his seat (bathroom, drink, etc.). Talking out of turn or when the instructor is talking will not be allowed. Make sure those in class understand that there will always be times set aside for them to talk and to ask questions. If someone is disruptive, they should be asked to leave the class. Males tend to be louder and more boisterous than females; allow for this to some degree. Explain the program and make them sound like fun! Admit the fact that there will be some laughter because of the subject matter but let them know you don't approve of laughing at other people who ask questions.

Talk about confidentiality within the classroom and the option to not participate in an activity or speak out if they don't feel like it. Let them brainstorm on the definition of sexuality, what it means to men, women, to themselves. Ask them what they want to learn about - and write it down to let them know you take them seriously. You may

change your curriculum somewhat to allow for their concerns or interests in a particular area. Tell them they may use the words they know best but that they will also learn the proper terminology later. They must see that you do not shock easily and can relate comfortably to them about sexual matters. More of them will probably volunteer information and make statements instead of asking questions. Respect these declarations--even if inaccurate--being careful not to demean anyone or dispute their wisdom.

COMMUNICATION AND RESPECT

This first session must open lines of communications and establish trust--a more difficult task in a male group than in a female group. Don't dwell on a statement made to elicit laughter or attract attention. Answer any questions about yourself that you feel comfortable answering but don't hesitate to draw the line by pointing out that you will not be asking them personal questions. The first session is crucial: It may determine how many return for the second, third, or other sessions. While girls may return because they feel obligated or have made a commitment, boys usually return because they want to be there. The first session should be used to establish trust, pique curiosity and interest, set firm rules, and begin to develop a mutual respect.

Boys are less likely to ask questions than girls; this is true at every age. However, once secure in their environment, young boys do open up and ask many questions about girls and how their bodies work. (It's difficult for them to ask about their own bodies.) Many

questions center on "techniques" of sexual intercourse or masturbation, including "how to" and "what if" types of questions. They are often worried about future performances and what will be expected of them when the time comes. Boys' questions are generally more sophisticated--perhaps because of locker room talk, older brothers, a glance at a Penthouse forum--and thus ask about oral sex or cross-dressing.

The subject of homosexuality is a must in any program with young boys: They will bring it up if you don't. There is concern about homosexuality involving fears of being approached or becoming homosexual. There are many questions about pregnancy--many on birth defects--and someone will always ask about siamese twins. Although questions will often be asked in slang or street lanuage, use correct terminology to answer.

By comparison, girls' questions generally reflect concerns about their bodies, menstruation and pregnancy (does it hurt to have a baby?). Girls ask about love, relationships and feelings: How does it feel to make love? How do you know you are in love? They are more likely to use acceptable words or euphenisms. Be aware that older boys (age 14 and up) are defensive and have very few questions. If questions are asked, they are about sexually transmitted diseases, rape and what girls really want sexually. Very rarely do they ask about birth control, which is a popular topic for older girls.

For boys or girls of any age who may be to embarrassed to ask questions in public, utilize a question box. Make sure they have pencil and paper and place the box close to the exit. They can deposit their questions on the way out and you can set aside a special

time during the next session to answer them. Young boys often write questions just for the effect they will have on the class when you read them out loud. You can ignore these questions or choose to turn them into a learning experience, but offer high praise--reinforcement--for those who use the question box. Questions are a sign of maturity and are most welcome!

When conducting sexuality education programs with young males, I have not found handouts to be effective. If used, I collect them at the end of the class. Girls will keep track of handouts, take them home, show them to their parents and probably read them, but boys rarely do this. They find it embarrassing to come from such a class with papers or pamphlets. They would not be seen reading them and usually toss them away quickly. Use the written word with discretion. Remember American children are oriented to visual learning. Boys--like girls--love films and filmstrips and often I will promise a special film for the next session to assure a good turnout.

What types of exercises or activities work well with young boys? Through trail and error, I have discovered a few activities that seem well suited for pre-puberty groups. Of course, each group is different and once you get the feel of a group you may need to play it by ear. Time is an important factor to consider including the number or length of sessions planned.

Within your time frame, what are your teaching goals and which exercises will best accomplish these goals? These are many excellent curriculums available that are aappropriate for any type of sexuality

education program. I frequently utilize bits and pieces from several different outlines and glean ideas from workshops and other professionals. Several exercises I have found effective follow.

One popular exercise and a great ice-breaker is the Body Lanuage or Dirty Word exercise. I put up several sheets of newsprint around the room and give each boy in the class a magic marker or crayon. At the top of each sheet is a word: "Penis", "Vagina", "Breasts" or "Intercourse". Then the boys get 10 or 15 minutes to fill in the sheets. With any words--pet names, slang, medical or other terms--that they associate with the word at the top of the sheet. This exercise generates much excitement and much laughter. After they finish, we examine the words and discuss them. The exercise serves several purposes: It gets the words out in the open and thus dilutes the shock value; it demonstrates how many different terms are applied to these body parts (a knee is just a knee); and it illustrates that society views sexual parts of the body in a variety of ways. I also learn new words that way!

In another exercise that highlights on male/female stereotypes (and that can be effective with any age group or with mixed groups), I ask the boys to write down the advantages of being male and then to list the advantages of being female. It's amazing the ideas they pop up with: Girls can wear more or different clothes, boys must work harder, girls can talk more. The lists provide a real insight

for everyone. Then the sheets are posted and comparisons are made. What are the differences and what are the similarities? As a female, I can sometimes offer them a different perspective. When this exercise is done early in a continuing series, it can provide information on the group and its views and experiences. Of course, the goal is to explore the concept that both sexes share many of the the same feelings, hopes, fears and needs.

A third exercise examines the influence of the popular media and works well with both pre-puberty males and females. Blank newsprint is hung around the room with the words "love" or "sex" printed at the top. I give the boys magazines and scissors and ask each of them to cut out two pictures--one representing sex the other love--and to tape them to the appropriate sheet. When everyone is done, each boy has a chance to discuss his pictures. This exercise works well because each class member has some time in the limelight. They enjoy telling about their "sexy" pictures (many are lingerie ads). While the "love" pictures are usually of family or mothers and baby.

This exercise offers an opportunity to identify the different kinds of love we experience and the media's impact on the concept of love and sex. Even a young child can see how sex is used in advertising and quite often the same picture or ad may appear on both the love and the sex sheet.

The boys must defend their choices and the discussion can be very lively. I usually allow plenty of time for this exercise --45 minutes or more. Unfinished business can carry over to the next session.

The "Clump" exercise helps to approach the issue of "peer pressure". The boys are asked to stand in one "clump" close together. When given instructions, the group, operating as one, move forward, sideways or backward, hop, etc. Have them do this until the novelty wears off and it becomes boring. Following this exercise, ask the boys how they felt being part of one big group--an unknown. Then, after a bit of discussion, ask what unique talent each has to offer as an individual. This is a fun exercise as the boys reveal amazing talents. Some can play an instrument, burp at will, wiggle their ears, turn their eyelids upside down, and, of course breakdance. Give each a moment in the spotlight where they can demonstrate his talent or tell about it. Point out how exciting it is that each person is so special and unique and how dull if everyone moved and acted like a clump. Emphasize that a crucial part of growing up involves developing our own ideas and personalities as individuals.

These exercises are suggestions only; certainly there is a wealth of material available to use in designing programs. More sex education literature and visual aids are being developed that focus on the male and his needs and responsibilities.

As sex educators we must actively solicit programing for males, and the earlier the better. Boys are exposed to more myths and misinformation at an earlier age then girls. Boys, too, need factual

information, decision-making skills, increased feelings of self worth and permission to escape the narrowing confines of macho sterotypes.

From a personal standpoint, I find working with young boys is challenging, exciting and a constant learning experience. After all, only a young boy would ask "Can you sleep in a rubber"?

Sherry Norfleet is a Community Educator for Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Virginia, Inc., Hampton, Virginia and is certified as a Sexuality Educator by the Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists.